



Middle James River 2005



This 61.5-mile stretch of the James River from Scottsville down to Watkins Landing has historically been one of the best fisheries in Virginia. Severe weather events from the late 1990's into the beginning of the 2000's have resulted in a severe downturn of the river fishery. Especially drastic was the drought year of 2002 and the flood year of 2003. Research has shown that fisheries in the river, especially smallmouth bass, are dependent on "normal" river flows in the month of June. When either weather extreme hits the state, recruitment of young fish into the system is severely reduced. We are currently in one of these severe cycles but there is good news. The 2004 smallmouth bass year class was excellent. Normal rainfall amounts resulted in a boom year class of smallmouth bass. In another year, 2006, these fish will enter the fishery and catch rates will start to increase. Hopefully 2005 will be another good year class and the fishery will bounce back. In the meantime, larger fish are still present in the system so the potential to catch big smallmouth still exists. The fishing activity will be slower for a couple of more years but things are definitely looking up.

The James River warmwater fishery consists of smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, sunfish (redecor sunfish, redear sunfish, bluegill, rock bass), channel catfish, and flathead catfish. Other species like fallfish, redhorse sucker species, gar, and carp are also abundant in the James.

A 2004 creel survey from Bent Creek to Scottsville reinforced the fact that the fishery in the James is in a down cycle. Fishing effort was 1/10 what it has been in years past and total catch of smallmouth bass was only 2480 fish (April to September). In comparison, catch of smallmouth bass in 2000 in the upper James was estimated to be nearly 90,000 fish. Fall samples in 2004 were dominated by young-of-the-year smallmouth bass. Only 12% of smallmouth bass sampled were adult fish (2+ years old) and the largest fish was only 19 inches. Even with the poor fishing year, smallmouth bass dominated the river fishery accounting for 82% of the total fishery. The fishery shows signs of recovery and in another two to three years will hopefully be something to brag about again.

In recent years, flathead catfish have received much attention due to the perception that the population has exploded and resulted in the reduction of the smallmouth bass fishery. Flathead catfish aren't to blame for the reduction in the smallmouth bass fishery but may be impacting sunfish populations in recent years. With potentially poor recruitment due to extreme weather events, extra predation by flatheads might be taking a toll on the sunfish populations.

Several concrete boat ramps are open for public use on this stretch of river. They include ramps in Scottsville, Hardware WMA, New Canton, Columbia, Cartersville, West View, Maidens, and Watkins Landing. The longest stretch is from Maidens to Watkins at 13 miles while the shortest stretch is from Cartersville to West View at 5 miles. There are excellent float trips in this stretch of river so plan for an enjoyable family day on the river. Consult the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries' (VDGIF) publication, "Floating the James River", available from area VDGIF offices or online at our website, www.dgif.virginia.gov for more information on float trip opportunities.